

DIALOGUE

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NOVEMBER 2021

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BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: TRUST-BUILDING THROUGH THE MOBILITY OF ACADEMIC ELITE BETWEEN GREECE AND TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This proposed research study aims to shed light on the role of academic mobility in the development of relations between Turkey and Greece by focusing on junior and senior participants' experiences from both countries. Examining the literature on the mobility of academics worldwide shows that academic cooperation between two or more countries, at global, regional regional, or bilateral levels, has been utilized to raise mutual understanding and enhance awareness and recognition towards each other. One of the academic mobility outcomes is to improve trust between the states by conducting their research. The exchange of knowledge, experience, culture, and language between parties and fostering intercultural dialogue become critical "soft" indicators in the building of trust between them. Therefore, it is critical to understand how mobile academics connect with local people, researchers, and NGOs in the host country. Drawing from those experiences, we intend to examine how the mobility of academics between Greece and Turkey enables trust-building and consolidates the relations between them, especially in this current period of turbulence in the relations between the two states.

Keywords: Academic mobility, Turkish-Greek Relations, Trust-building

INTRODUCTION

Academic mobility is an established process due to various available scholarships and exchange programs. These schemes that encourage academics to continue their research in different countries, not only aim to lead new developments in science, but also aim to establish mutual understanding between countries (for example, Fox International Fellowship, Fullbright), to increase awareness on democracy (for example, the Erasmus project), to the exchange of language and culture, and to establish networks among academic elites. Therefore, brain circulation is vital for disseminating scientific knowledge and supporting cooperation between the scientific communities across countries. (Chepurenko 2015) Moreover, in the literature, the mobility of academics is also perceived as a “counterbalance to parochial thinking”. (Teichler 2015) At this point, Teichler argues that “internationalisation and, notably, mobility have a strong positive under-current: they are expected to serve peace and mutual understanding, quality enhancement, a richer cultural life and personality development, technological innovation, economic growth and societal well-being.” (Teichler 2015, 10) Furthermore, in their study, Bilecen and Faist identify international doctoral students as knowledge brokers who are able to hold a wide range of knowledge, to create bridges and to disseminate knowledge. They also underline the importance of reciprocity, trust, and solidarity as social conditions of the knowledge transfer through doctoral students. (Bilecen and Faist 2015)

From this perspective, this project's objective is to understand whether and how the mobility of academics between Greece and Turkey can be a tool for trust building. To answer this question, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with six academics who have had training or research in Greece and Turkey (Turkish scholars in Greece and vice versa). While the participants of academic mobility differ, inter alia, in terms of their academic interests, academic level, and place of visit; all the interviewees come from various fields of the social sciences, with different academic status, and different places where they conducted their mobility.

During the interviews, we aimed to reveal the influence that the existing scholarships and exchange programs have on the scholars' role in the inter-state dialogue. Moreover, we asked them to reflect on their individual level of motivation, experiences, and networks they were involved in, if any, as well as in the advantages and disadvantages of conducting their research abroad either in Greece or Turkey. Due to data protection issues related to the ethical practices of anonymity and confidentiality, we have replaced the names of interviewees with letter and number codes where G denotes a Greek citizen and T denotes a Turkish citizen.[1]

THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG CAUSALITY DILEMMA [2]

Drawing from our qualitative research, the multilevel academic mobility between Turkey and Greece in the framework of the relations between these two states, are interdependent. On the one hand, the positive feature of the relations led to increased academic mobility and cooperation between the two states especially during the “Turkish-Greek Spring” – which started with the Cem-Papandreou rapprochement process between Ismail Cem and George Papandreou-between 1999 and 2007. During this period, a gradualist approach was followed that led the two countries to build cooperation in areas concerning “low-politics” including collaborations in the realm of culture and civil society. In particular, between 2000 and 2004, various new agreements were signed to improve economic, social, and cultural relations. (Onis and Yilmaz 2008)

Many of the interviewees started their academic mobility during the years of rapprochement. On the other hand, with regards to the consolidation of bilateral relations, deepening beyond their temporality and providing sustainability between the two states, the importance of academic mobility has been repeatedly highlighted in the interviews as a source of establishing a mutual understanding.

G1, in particular, a Greek scholar who worked in a Turkish university for almost 10 years, emphasized the interdependence between the political/diplomatic atmosphere between Turkey-Greece and academic mobility. He underlined how good relations enable academic dialogue and exchange as well as how academic mobility and good relations are contributing to a “mentality change” which paves the way for a sustainable form for better relations between the two countries.

From a bird's eye view, participants shared similar outcomes about the role and place of academic mobility in Turkish-Greek relations. For instance, T2, an academic in a state university in Turkey, brought our attention the fragile characteristics of academic mobility due to the volatility of bilateral relations while explaining her decision for her own academic pathway. After she completed her MA degree in Greece, she did not want to take the risk to continue with a doctoral degree at the same university. She narrated her anxiety by stating that “if the relations between the states deteriorate, my PhD could be in jeopardy.” After her experience on both sides of the Aegean, she interpreted how the positive atmosphere can quickly be reversed and cause negative outcomes on multiple fronts.

In parallel with the concerns of T2, G2, a Greek national conducting her PhD studies in Turkey and working as a lecturer in a state university, highlights that during the periods when bilateral relations deteriorate, it can be discouraging to choose Turkey as a place of work if there is no further motivation. She adds that she feels in a more precarious position in terms of losing her job as well as terms of her relationship with the Turkish state during times of crisis between the two countries. She adds: “I thought several times before these crises hit me, I should leave”.

In the past, Turkey and Greece seized an opportunity in their diplomatic relations thereby impacting various areas of interaction, including academia. Yet, academia has its own dynamics, uniqueness, possibilities, and limits which distinguishes it from other sectors.

[1] See the appendix at the end of the chapter for more information.

[2] The metaphor was used during the interview with G1.

Through its direct and indirect impact on bilateral relations, academic mobility must be considered as one of the key elements that can contribute to the consolidation of a sustainable framework. Although relations between Turkey and Greece possess multiple elements and multifaceted characteristics, this paper looks the issue from the perspective of academic mobility. The narratives and experiences of academics who have been mobile between Turkey and Greece, reveal some commonalities and differences on this issue. After presenting the current situation including the advantages, as well as the challenges that academics face during their mobility, this paper will offer recommendations to strengthen academic mobility between the two countries. What does experience say about the interdependency between Academic Mobility and Relations between Greece and Turkey?

INITIATING ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT: INDIVIDUAL EFFORT VS. INSTITUTIONAL ENCOURAGEMENT

The experiences of our interviewees show that individual efforts are more prominent than institutional encouragement from the beginning of the mobility or visits to the establishment of networks during the period of mobility or work, in particular for the early-stage researchers. Both G1 and G2 visited Turkey several times on their own initiatives before they started to study and/or work in Turkey due to their academic interest in Turkey. Even after they moved to Turkey for a longer period of study/work in Turkish universities, their engagement in the academic environment and the establishment of networks was limited to their individual efforts. The lack of institutional encouragement to integrate them into the already existing academic environments in those universities limited their capacity to create a sense of belonging. For instance, G2 explains why she could not establish relationships at the university where she was working as a lecturer despite her advanced level of Turkish:

I could not get in contact with the people at the university. Except the ones working in my department. There were some people that I knew but I could not make habits at the university because I was only going for the lecturing hours. (...) There were certain issues at the university including not having an office. I was not able to work there. For a while, I did not even have a desk there. Then, we were sharing as four people three desks. Later on, I had a desk but I was not able to work with someone else so I could not go there. I was going there when I was giving lectures but I was not going when I did not have. I have never said that I should go to the university to work.

Together with the absence of a sense of belonging, the establishment of academic networks for future projects usually takes place through individual relations or friendships rather than any institutional encouragement for involving them in the academic projects.

The importance of individual relations is reflected in the experience of T3, an academic in Turkey who conducted her doctoral research in Greece. Beyond the academic framework, she utilized her biographical background while visiting historical archives in Kavala. Her family moved to Turkey from Greece during the population exchange of 1920. During her Kavala visit, she met the manager of the Kavala Tobacco Museum who was also descended from a migrant family. T3 describes the situation between them as one of “sympathy” which comes from having a shared memory. Indeed, apart from the academic background, the biographical background is critical in such an environment where individual efforts define one’s destiny.

WHO ARE YOU?: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE IN THE EYES OF THE INSTITUTIONS

During their academic mobility between Turkey and Greece, the participants experienced both the feeling of being an academic “as an outsider” as well as being “a member of a nation”. This is a process that is also being shaped by the individual’s background in academia, be it by either a senior or junior academic, as well as by the place he/she visits. As understood by the narratives of the interviewees from both sides, they have established their experiences during their academic mobility in the intersection of their academic interests and their national identity. While they all have shared experiences due to this intersection, their position in the academic hierarchy and the local configurations of the places they visited are crucial to understand the differences among them.

G2 is a historian who wrote his doctoral thesis on Turkey. He had been visiting Turkey since the late 1990s and he worked in relevant archives in the summers between 2003 and 2005. At the time, he was also giving lessons on the Greek language and the history of Greece. He explains this situation:

There is no problem if you are giving lectures on Greece to the students in Turkey even if your expertise is on Turkey. You can lecture whatever you want. Your national identity is more important than your scientific expertise. I was also giving a comparative lecture on Greece and Turkey but then, a new professor came as a head of the department and he decided about everything. He did not tell explicitly but it was obvious. As much as you are expert on Turkey, as a Greek, you cannot give any lecture on Turkish history and you cannot even give any lecture on history. “We are Turks, we give history classes.” It was explicitly nationalism.

The junior scholars from Turkey talked about how they observed doubtful views towards them. T2 was a MA student in the field of International Relations, and she emphasized that how the perceptions are different towards Turks even they were a member of an international program; she shared how the academics questioned her aim to learn Greek:

You feel that distance easily. They are doubtful towards you by asking why you are learning Greek, or why you are here. Because Greece is a small country, and they are questioning why it has an importance for an expert of International Relations.

Nevertheless, she explained how the place where she did her academic mobility is also important for the experience by underlying that she was on the outside of the mainstream university tradition of Greece.

I was in the Komotini and the professors were coming from Thessaloniki or Athens according to their expertise biweekly. It provides for a more flexible environment... Indeed, I thought not being in Athens was a negative situation for me, but no, being out of mainstream discourse was better.

While the place of visit matters while shaping the experience, it would not produce the same outcomes every time. T3 explained how she had to manage the local dynamics during her research stays in Kavala and in Crete.

I think the difficult part of the job was to manage the reaction of people and the dynamics of the locals. You don’t want to be antipathetic to anyone, you don’t want to hurt anyone. That’s not your purpose for being there, but in a way, you might want to manage them and distance yourself by setting boundaries. At that point being a researcher provides an opportunity. Thanks to your identity as a researcher, people behave moderately even their negative reactions.

It shows that beyond the local dynamics, one’s academic background is important and shapes the opinions of others. Even though T3 referred to the same feeling about the “doubtfulness”, she explained her experiences differently. Even a slight difference in the academic level impacted attitudes towards the visitors. However, T3 shared an anecdote which reveals how national identity becomes a serious matter in academia:

When I was in Kavala, I was researching in the archive of the Kavala Tobacco Museum. Then the director invited me at a local conference in Kavala to present what I found. Yet, a serious discussion emerged, and they were angry with the museum director because of me. They said that you opened the archive to the Turks before us.

Even though the archival materials were about the records of the Tobacco workers, and not critical to issues of “national security”, T3 and the director of the museum experienced a public outcry. Beyond the experiences of junior academics, the senior ones are more welcomed to the academic environment on both sides. When T1 or G1 explained their narratives, they did not make any reference about doubtful views towards them.

On the one hand, G1 was the first full-time academic in a Turkish University as a Greek academic where his cadre was assigned by YÖK (Turkey’s Institution of Higher Education). Moreover, he brought to our attention, that he was employed as an expert in International Law and International Relations. Instead of hindering him, his expertise provided opportunity to him and became the founder of a research center with a focus on Turkey and Greece under the umbrella of the university he worked.

On the other hand, T1 was one of the outstanding professors in Turkish academia who had been in the Republic of Cyprus as a visiting professor for three semesters. He also pointed out that he did not face any negative reaction:

In academic life, people are evaluated by what they write, produce, and think. When I was in Cyprus, I was professor. I was respected in there.

While being a senior or junior academic shaped the experience of academic mobility participants together with the impact of local configurations, all underlined the importance of research interests regardless of the aforementioned differences. Even though they focused on various fields of the social sciences - politics, international relations, history, literature, and law - they underlined their challenges as well as the importance of comparative research between Turkey and Greece.

On the one hand, T3 stressed that Greece was the place to be due to her research interest. Both academic interest and shared history between Turkey and Greece lead to the mobility of researchers. On the other hand, all he participants reflect on their experiences and observations on how difficult it is to sustain a common institute, research, or dialogue due to prevailing political sensibilities:

Working on diplomatic relations is different than focusing on cultural studies. Complicated or politically extreme issues may complicate the situation. At that time, you can become two parties of a litigation.

However, academic mobility and experiences from both sides provide an abundance of inputs for the participants. According to shared expertise, G1 and T2 referred to the in-depth understanding they reached on domestic politics and the political culture of both countries. While they spent their times as ‘outsiders’, they deepened their understanding towards the components of the political culture or domestic politics dynamics of the host country. Thus, they acquired an insider’s outlook which is required for academic objectivity and rationalization. G1 further expanded on this, as he and other university colleagues established a research center with a focus on relations between Greece and Turkey, and a related post-graduate program. He stressed that it was the first and only research center which had been created during a time of positive momentum between Turkey and Greece. Yet, this initiative ended both due to the economic crisis in Greece and the emerging political crisis between Turkey and Greece. However, this initiative proved that there is an audience for an institute to establish academic dialogue with a demand from both sides. The most important outcome and transfer of experience is the methodological approach that was adopted by G1:

We were really keen to deconstruct the nationalist narrative. Not from the top-down but from the bottom-up on both sides. We left the students alone for two weeks in the beginning to know themselves. All narratives were deconstructed and then we started the educational process to move beyond them. That was the unique feature of the program. To deconstruct what they had previously learned. Very few people only declined to change their ideas. But many of them changed their ideas without any pressure, only after they got to know each other.

The program aimed to dismantle preconceptions before embarking to build dialogue between participants from both countries. It motivated students to increase mutual understanding and emphatic relations instead of clashing through nation centric discourses about shared historical events. Through the program, the rational and objective perspective were the key building pillars. Also, G1 commented on the experience of those who refused to change their ideas. According to him, even though they were not receptive to changing their preconceptions, they were at least aware of the ideas of those that were.

As the experience of the center for Turkey-Greece relations shows, although academic dialogue is required, it is not capable to solve every problem. However, the outcomes of the program led to a “normalization” of the mentality and brought greater understanding to both sides. Based on the experiences of academics from the two countries, and through their own narratives, this part examined the intersection of national identity and academic expertise. Considering individual differences and various local contexts, it shows the challenges and prospects for an academic dialogue between Turkey and Greece as a key trust building factor. As previously mentioned, academia and diplomacy are interrelated when it comes to relations between Greece and Turkey. While the tendency shows that academic mobility provides an ongoing and long-lasting bridge between Turkey and Greece, it should be seen as an opportunity to deepen and widen the dialogue.

SEEING YOURSELF OR BEING SEEN BY OTHERS AS A MISSIONARY

An examination of the experiences and narratives of the participants of academic mobility provides some answers about how and why they have a place in the discussions of Turkey-Greece relations beyond the academic context. However, one must ask whether the participants consider themselves as key figures in the trust-building between the two states. The answer is two-fold:

- i) It depends on the location of the participants and where they position themselves during their experience, and
- ii) It depends on the views of the environment where they are located.

Many of our interviewees began their academic mobility during the “Turkey-Greece Spring” and stressed that it was a different time than the present. The efforts of senior scholars prove that they aimed to utilize the positive context to deepen bilateral relations while the junior scholars benefitted for the further pursuit of their research in both countries. While the senior scholars furthered the relations within the institutional framework, the junior scholars followed more solitary paths. However, beyond their academic self-identification, they faced different perceptions as well. For instance, T2 explained her own experience while emphasizing the others’ views as:

They looked at us differently, even in the international environment, because you are the one that can be identified as the “other” of everyone else within that environment. They are looking at you how you are sitting, smiling and what you are doing. They just look. Because of the image of the Turk in their mind. You are faced with that. I even said once, “I am not a representative of something. We are not representing our countries”. But it was not like that. Moreover, they were questioning me as a woman. You always meet and face judgments.

G2 reflects on his position vis-à-vis the university’s hierarchy and his relations with the other academics:

You are more flexible as a foreigner than a local in terms of the relationship between employee and institution. But it is in the practice. We had the same duty with Turkish citizens but in practice, they were expected to do more work than us. There was more freedom for the foreigners. (...). There is a language issue. They cannot ask from you to do bureaucratic work that a Turkish citizen can do. Second is about trust. I don’t say that it is a hidden nationalism, but it is about controlling. Not retaining. As a foreigner, you can flee. They cannot control you as much as a Turkish citizen.

It can be also something cultural. “They are not like us”. (...) I guess that they think that these strict hierarchical relations are not suitable for foreigners, Europeans, Westerners. But it is my guess.

In terms of his relations with other academics, he adds:

There was a type of relation with other academics, in particular senior academics that was very respectful. If I compare it with their relationship with Turkish, local academics, I could say it was more respectful with extra distance, extra understanding. He or she can give more work to a local or can speak more abruptly, etc. There can be some exceptions, but it is usually personal. There is also a possibility that since he is a foreigner, he should not say something bad about us. (...) They were more comfortable while talking to us. They did not have any competition with us. There was no competition between us. I guess it made our relations more relaxed.

Indeed, the mobility participants aimed to focus on their research, yet the nature of academia and various type of human interactions lead to many of the unplanned direct or indirect outcomes which are introduced above. In terms of direct impact, the participants became members of an international/bilateral academic circle which provides a venue for dialogue between both sides. Beyond their academic interactions, they became public figures who present the ideas, and commentary on television or write newspaper columns. For instance, T2 has a book published in Greek, and she has contributed to both Greek and Turkish academia; she also participates on television news programs as a specialist on Turkey-Greece relations. On the other hand, the impacts of academic mobility can be diverse. Indeed, G1 underlined this issue while talking about the impact of the research center in the University in terms of helping bring about a change in the mentality of many people. Moreover, long lasting changes in one’s mindset – G1 identified the process as “someone who learned the critical outlook would never come back from that understanding” – can enable the spread ideas among those with whom they are interacting. In addition, G1 shared another example by emphasizing the importance of experience-sharing within the mobility.

In a two-three days long event in a University in Istanbul, only a few students came from Greece in its first year. Then the number increased, because when the first students returned home, they shared their observations and experiences in Istanbul.

This is an unexpected, and not costly interaction, that can contribute to developing sustainable relations between Turkey and Greece. By interacting with the “other” paves the way to recreating shared memories, deconstructing the grand ethnocentric narratives, and getting rid of the burdens and luggage of the past while deepening knowledge, mutual understanding, and cooperation between each other. In this sense, G3 says that she has never been confronted with any prejudice from her students. On the contrary, her students felt that it is beneficial that they have a Greek lecturer so they can learn from her. As a response to their positive attitude, G3 was also feeling responsible to introduce Greece to her Turkish students:

I consider all my classes from a holistic point of view. They are about language but I see them as classes on culture. I try to introduce Greece as much as possible with songs, movies, studies on Athens, etc. There are many senior students (students in the Modern Greek Language Department) who have never been in Greece yet. I am their connection with Greece. I perceive my role from this angle as well.

Nevertheless, regarding how one is perceived, G2 underlines how others assign to him the role of representative of his country:

Even if you say that you don’t have that kind of mission, just because people see you as a Greek, there is such a thing. I have been going to Turkey for 20 years and you are the only one as a Greek person. For instance, there is a football game between Turkey and Greece, they can see you as a representative. Even if you do not want it, they can see you as a representative of Greece.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

First, our interviews show that the individual efforts for participating in academic mobility in both countries are more predominant than the institutional efforts, in particular for the junior researchers. Even though the individual efforts are always crucial for any type of academic engagement, the lack of institutional support brings limitations to the mobility. Also, the diversity of funding mechanisms for the researchers to apply is insufficient. There are several scholarships to support researchers in both country such as those provided by the Onassis Foundation and the American Research Centre; however, they need to be followed through individual efforts rather than institutional encouragement. Therefore, the possibility of a continued and enhanced academic dialogue between the two countries is primarily left to individual initiatives. Nevertheless, more institutionalized scholarships that are designated for specific purposes such as the European Union's Jean Monnet funding schemes prove their value to improve academic mobility. Additionally, our qualitative data showed that while Greek citizens benefit less from scholarships during their research period in Turkey, they have opportunities chance to find academic jobs while in Turkey whereas the possibility of finding an academic position in Greece for junior researchers from Turkey is rather limited.

Secondly, the bilateral relations between Turkey and Greece have a significant impact on the researchers' motivation in terms of the start or the continuation of their research or work in the other's country. At this point, it should be also highlighted that for those who choose to stay in their country of mobility, the feeling of insecurity leads to further self-censorship in their selection of research topics or to their freedom of expression. The restrictions over academic freedom (either auto-censored or institutional) carry the risk of a reduced number of academic publications as an outcome of academic mobility. Therefore, core values such as safeguarding academic freedom and respect for the freedom of expression emerge as essential challenges for both countries.

Taking into consideration the lack of institutional encouragement and the impact of the political atmosphere, our third recommendation concerns the establishment of a model for an institution, or a center designated for academic mobility in various disciplines between Turkey and Greece. Within the framework of this model, a committee designated to support certain number of researchers at different levels of their academic development from different disciplines could be established. Nonetheless, it is crucial for this committee to be politically independent and to prioritize academic objectivity. Additionally, this committee should have recognition and credibility in both countries.

Finally, to increase efficiency and derive outcomes from the academic mobility, institutionalized networks should be improved. Early-stage researchers, in particular, do not usually take part in already existing projects or academic networks in these institutions but try instead to establish their networks through personal and professional relationships established during their mobility. However, bringing together the expertise of young academics from both countries across different disciplines for knowledge production and enhancement is also beneficial for the institutions where researchers are undergoing their academic mobility.

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APPENDIX

Table A: Profile of the interviewees

	CURRENT JOB	ACADEMIC MOBILITY
G1	HE IS A PROFESSOR AND WORKING IN A RESEARCH INSTITUTE	FULL-TIME PROFESSOR IN TURKEY
T1	HE IS A PROFESSOR IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN TURKEY	VISITING PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS
G2	HE IS A LECTURER IN GERMANY	RESEARCH VISITS DURING HIS DOCTORAL STUDIES AFTER ACQUIRING HIS PHD, HE BECAME A FULL TIME LECTURER IN A STATE UNIVERSITY IN TURKEY
T2	SHE IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN A STATE UNIVERSITY IN TURKEY	MA STUDENT & DOCTORAL RESEARCHER IN GREECE
G3	SHE IS A PHD CANDIDATE IN A STATE UNIVERSITY AND A LECTURER IN ANOTHER STATE UNIVERSITY IN TURKEY	DOCTORAL RESEARCHER AND LECTURER IN TURKEY
T3	SHE IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN TURKEY	DOCTORAL RESEARCHER IN GREECE

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